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N.Y. test scores raise questions

School administrators worry about high opt-out rates, wavering education system

August 3, 2016

By ADAM ST. PIERRE and PETER CROWLEY - Staff , Adirondack Daily Enterprise

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Adirondack school districts varied widely on the state math and English language arts tests third- through eighth-graders took in April, but how much do these scores mean?

The state Education Department released the results Friday. Scores are up statewide, especially in ELA, but due to opt-outs and the state's changing education infrastructure, local school administrators question the importance and validity of these measures.

The rankings divide students' scores into four levels, starting with low performance in level 1 and rising to "excellent" at level 4. Levels 3 and 4 are grouped together as a "proficiency" category that generalizes a district's testing success.

The state's average of students who were proficient in math rose 1 percent this year to 39 percent, while ELA averages jumped from 31 to 38 percent. Most schools in and around the Tri-Lakes area fell below these averages.

The most proficient local districts in math are Keene (66 percent) and AuSable Valley (40 percent), but 69 percent of AuSable's students didn't take the tests because their parents wouldn't let them, whereas all of Keene's students sat for them. The highest ELA scores came from Long Lake (71 percent) and Keene (62 percent), but while all of Keene's 73 eligible students took the exams, only seven Long Lake students did.

Fact Box

State test scores

Grade 3-8 math and ELA proficiency, with changes from 2015

District	Math %	ELA %	Opt out % change
Keene	66 (+11)	62 (+7)	0 (+0)
AuSable Valley	40 (+6)	31 (+9)	69 (+4)
Lake Placid	31 (+1)	30 (+1)	29 (+15)
Tupper Lake	29 +3)	3 (+3)	4 (-4)

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Saranac Lake	25 (+0)	27 (-4)	44 (-3)
Long Lake	17 (-33)	71 (+28)	77 (+0)
Statewide	39 (+1)	38 (+7)	21 (+1)

Inconsistency cited

Tupper Lake proficiency rates rose 3 percent in both ELA and math. District Superintendent Seth McGowan said he's proud of the growth but isn't convinced the measure is reliable.

"Even statewide, it's almost a false data set because the tests are different than they were last year," McGowan said. "And the curriculum changed, especially where Common Core is involved, so there's no real way to get any valid, longitudinal information about our school, or really the performance of our individual students."

"It matters that they've changed systems. They've changed scoring scales. They've changed the format of the test, the length of it. These are not necessarily good or bad things; what's important is consistency. With that much change in them, for better or for worse, you just can't measure from year to year."

AuSable Valley Superintendent Paul Savage voiced similar concern, even though his district's scores improved substantially: up 9 percent in ELA proficiency and 6 percent in math.

"If you look back in the last 10 to 12 years of education, there have been numerous changes," Savage said. "I think that's part of the frustration educators and parents feel, that when you move to a different curriculum, a different assessment and you move to new requirements, the data from before is very different from what it's like now."

The Saranac Lake Central School District's ELA proficiency rate dropped from 31 to 27 percent even as the state rate jumped 7 percent. Its math proficiency remained steady at 25 percent, with a slight rise in level 4 students. Superintendent Diane Fox encourages going beyond these test scores to other metrics for measuring student success.

"We continue to focus on our graduation rate and our students' post-graduate opportunities because really, that's what we're here for," Fox said. "We're not here for any particular grade; we're here for all grades to work together to produce a student who's ready for the workforce."

Opt-out effects

Scores swung wildly in Long Lake, which at 57 students is the smallest K-12 school district in New York, according to Superintendent Donald Carlisle. Math proficiency plummeted 33 percent from last year, and ELA soared 28 percent. But only seven of 26 eligible students took the ELA exams, and only six took the math.

Those results don't mean much since "one kid can skew the whole thing," Carlisle said.

Savage agreed that the opt-outs make his school's scores unreliable.

"With such a small sample of students - it was only about 30 percent of our students taking the test - it's hard to really assess," he said.

Lake Placid's math and ELA scores rose 1 percent each, but opt-outs rose 15 percent. Superintendent Roger Catania said this makes it "difficult to draw reliable conclusions."

Forty-four percent of Saranac Lake students were opted out, and Fox said it puts stress on administrators when the district's state accountability status changes.

"It doesn't affect your state aid. It doesn't effect your title money," she said. "But there has certainly been a lot of extra work the district has had to do over the last two years, mainly because of opt-outs."

Statewide, 21 percent of students refused the tests. State Education Commissioner MaryEllen Elia acknowledged that in a video press release but said, "I think it's reasonable to concentrate on the hundreds of thousands of students who did take the test."

Tupper Lake schools had only 4 percent opted out. McGowan said parents typically make that choice for a perceived greater good - some for a political statement against the state - but he'd like to see the tests have consistency and children take them regularly.

"I'd like to be able to have them understand our perspective: that this is not a major deal, and they should not be taking this that seriously that they're upset about it," he said.

Regents more reliable?

The Lake Placid and Long Lake superintendents both said the high school Regents exams are a more relevant metric than these state tests. Both also touted their schools improvement in the Regents this past year.

"Given the importance that our students, parents, and teachers attach to the results of those exams, the Regents Exams are likely a better indicator of student performance and academic success," Catania wrote in an email.

Carlisle said past Regents results accurately reflected that Long Lake students were struggling in math, so last year they hired another math teacher. It worked.

"All but one ended up passing all the Regents ... and the one kid that actually failed was a transfer student from another district," he said. "Those are high-stakes exams. What we're talking about here, it is important, yes, but it's hard to conjure up a lot of meaning."

Staff Writer Antonio Olivero contributed to this report.

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